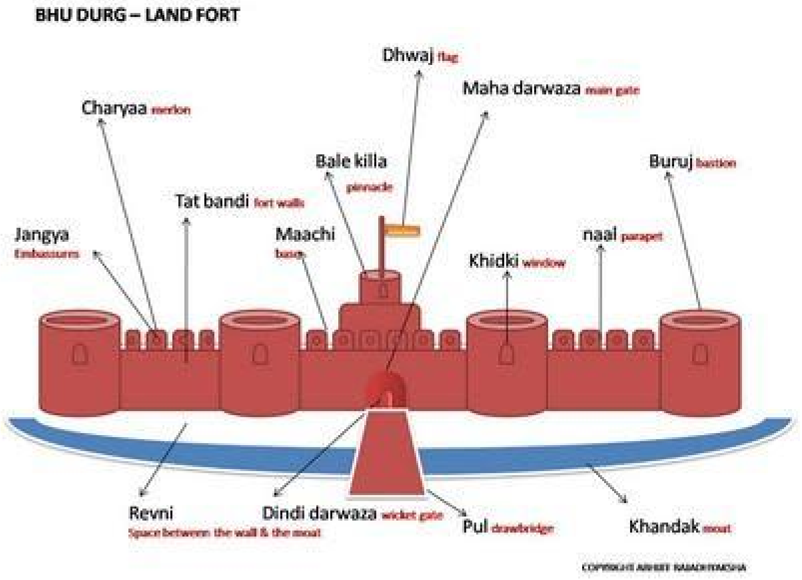
Forts of Maharashtra



'Sampoorna rajyaache saar te durg. Gadkot hetch raajya, gadkot mhanje raajyaache mool,gadkot mhanje khajina, gadkot mhanje sainyaache mool,gadkot mhanje raajya laxmi, gadkot mhanje aapale praan sarakshan'
– Aadnyaapatra by Ramchandra pant Amatya, the chief minister of Rani Tarabai.

Translation – Forts are the very basis of a kingdom. Forts themselves are the kingdom, forts are the origin of the kingdom, forts are the real treasure of the kingdom, forts are the basis of an army, forts are the wealth of the kingdom, forts are our best form of defence.

The English word Fort is derived from the Latin word 'fortis' meaning strong.

Forts were a primary defence mechanism in Maharashtra against enemy invasions since the ancient times and are known in the local language as '**killa**' (Qila in urdu). They were naturally and artificially protected human settlements, guarded by elements like the hills, the forests, the desert, the sea, and the man made stone structures that formed a armour around them.

One of the early reference to Forts in the sub continent occurs in the ancient political treatise 'Arthashastra' by Kautilya, whereby Kautilya classifies the forts as Jal durg (water forts), Giri durg (mountain forts),Vana durg (forest forts),Dhanu durg(arid/desert forts located in conditions devoid of easy water supply),Mahi durg (brick forts) and Nar durg(human forts). Not to mention the ancient cities in kingdoms like Mathura, Magadha etc were also mentioned being fortified settlements. The social treatise 'Manusmriti' by Manu also describes the advantages and disadvantages of different classifications of forts.

Maharashtra due to its peculiar topography has always revelled in different forms of fort constructions. Its structures and architectural designs have differed depending upon their region and location viz the plains, the coastal areas, the hilly terrain or the dense forests.

The forts in Maharashtra were constructed since the time of some its early ruling dynasties (and their feudatories) like the Satvahanas, the Rashtrakutas, the Kadambas, the Chalukyas ,the Yadavas, the Afghans, the Bahmanis, the Gonds in Berar,the Sultanates of Ahmednagar,Bijapur and Berar, the Siddis, the Europeans (British,Portuguese) and last but not the least the Marathas. The Marathas gave tremendous importance to Forts as they were their strongest defence against the marauding invaders. Due to the inherent hilly terrain of the Sahyadri range, most of their forts belonged to the 'hill' category. These forts protected the army and the wealth of the kings and housed virtually a village inside the fort.

Traditionally the Forts in Maharashtra were of the following types:

Hill Forts: These forts were constructed on the high hills and made from stone cut out from those very mountains. The high altitudes made these forts daunting for the enemy. In the vernacular Marathi language they were called as '**Giri Durg**' ('Giri' means the mountain and 'Durg' is the term for a fort).They were considered the most reliable in comparison to land forts e.g Raigad,Rajgad,Purandar,Sinhagad,Pratapgad,Shivneri,Rajmachi etc

Land Forts: These forts were created on the plains. In Marathi they were called '**Bhuikot**' (Durg).e.g Chakan fort,Bahadurgad,Solapur fort,Ahmednagar fort etc.

Sea Forts: These forts were created in the middle of the sea (at a shallow point with a solid foundation base) and protected by its vicious waves. In Marathi they were called '**Jal Durg**' . ChShivaji was quick to realise the importance of sea forts. They provided a efficient base for controlling sea traffic and trade. e.g Janjeera (the fort of Janjeera was considered virtually impregnable and was held by the Siddis, enabling them to withstand the most extreme of enemy pressures) , Sindhudurg (built by Ch Shivaji) ,Padmadurg (built by Ch Sambhaji) , Khanderi , Underi etc.

Forest Forts: These forts were created amidst a dense jungle, protected by the trees, the reptiles and wild animals. They were the '**Vana Durg**'.e.g Javali.
Human forts: human war formations , encampments often resembled forts. These were the '**Nar durg**'.

Barring the last which is a type of a field fortification, the rest are all of a permanent nature.

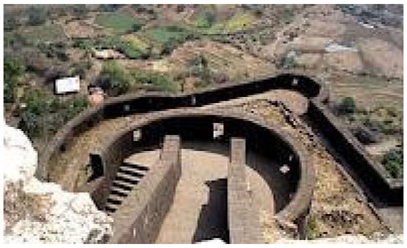
Forts in Maharashtra were often a combination of land and sea forts e.g Vijaydurg or mostly hill and forest/land forts e.g Daulatabad etc.
The forts in Maharashtra weren't as picturesque or aesthtic as their northern counterparts but were most practical under the circumstances.

The Hill Forts are most common in Maharashtra and scattered all around the Sahyadri mountains. They are located at short distances from each other and were accessed by crossing a couple of mountains. This helped the king and his officials escape from one fort to other in case the earlier fort was captured by the enemy.

The Pune district (area 15642 sq kms) itself has around forty forts big and small , while Nasik district (area 15,530 sq km) has approximately fifty five forts. Besides Pune and Nasik there are several forts in Mumbai Thane (mainly built by the Portuguese and the English), Raigad,Marathwada,Southern Maharashtra,Vidharba and Konkan .

The hill forts were constructed from stones carved out from the very mountains and joined (as per the design) with the help of lime,rubble,gravel,stones,bricks (used mainly in land forts/smaller forts),molten metal and sand. Lime/mortor was ground on the fort itself (in what were called the '**Chunyaachya ghaani**'. Chuna being the term for lime) with the help of a roller passing though a circular channel . The stones formed the outer layer of the fort. Stone layers were often sandwiched between earth,rubble and mortar. At several places the stones appear joint in the male female format devoid of any use of mortor. The stones were joined by mortar. There were even instances of molten metal (lead) used to fill up fissures and strenthen the construction.e.g at Sindhudurg. Together they gave a construction that's lasted for centuries.

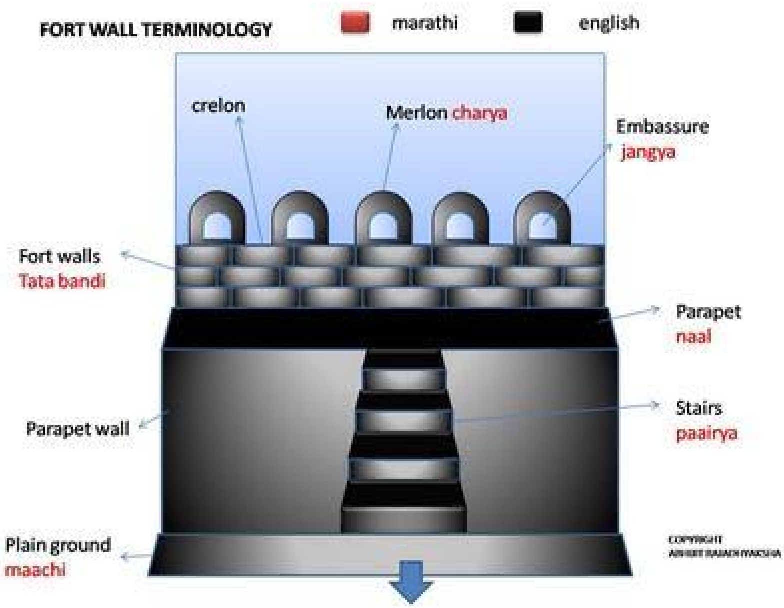
Some of the main features of a typical hill fort are:



'**Ghera**' or the outermost boundary that encompassed (besides the main fort) the many villages in its vicinity.
'**Chowkis**' or outposts were present near the forts to warn the people within the fort of any impending danger, keep a check on travellers etc.

Besides there were ‘**Mets**’ (smaller outposts on flat areas) midway to the fort, manned by locals and tribals like Kolis,Ramoshis,Maangs who were familiar with the surroundings and could even maintain a vigil at night.e.g Several such mets can still be seen at Sinhagad in Pune.

‘**Kada**’ or the vertical portion of the fort and the most difficult one to scale. History mentions Tanaji Malusare, a commandent of Shivajis forces climbing the hill fort of Sinhagad from the ‘Donagiri kada’ as the other entrances were heavily guarded.



‘**Tat bandi**’ or high stone walls of the fort. They comprise of the rampart with a **Naal / Faanzhi** or running parapet (allowing passageway for minmum one person, generally a sentry), streanthened by the fort walls with the ‘**charyaa**’ (merlons) and ‘**jangyaa**’ (embassures) punctuated within them. The semi circular merlons (a crenel between two merlons) gave a cover for the guards and the embassures that pierced through the merlons a view at the enemy on the crowd below. There were even machicolations made and used for pouring hot oil, throwing stones at the attackers from within their apertures.Some fort walls were kept high and one had to climb stairs to access the parapet way alongside them.
In case the walls were made from wood (as in European or American forts) they were termed as ‘**medhekots**’. Around the fort (excluding the walls themselves. Weeds,plants on the fort walls were removed/ burnt out so that the enemy soldiers cant use them to climb the fort) thick vegetation was encouraged, so that
a contingent of soldiers could be hidden to launch the first attack on a approaching enemy.

‘**Buruj**’ or Bastions were built joining the fort walls and inadvertently streangthened them. They were semi circular (semi cylindrical etc) extentions of the fort walls that protruded on the outside (unlike the British ones which were square and the Portuguese bastions being pentagonal in shape). They also served as watch towers (**tehelnicha buruj**) or bases for firing cannons.e.g Naldurg has around 113 bastions.

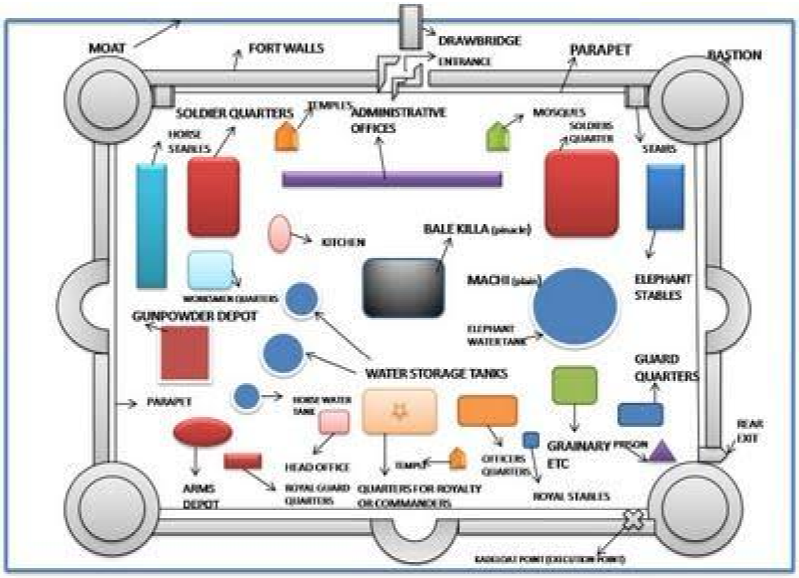
‘**Mahadarwaza**’ was the main entrance (gate) of the fort, built large enough for an elephant to pass through. It generally had huge wooden (and metallic) gates with rows and columns of long iron spikes afixed in order to prevent a enemy elephant or a wooden rammer from forcing open the gates e.g the Mahadarwaza or Dilli darwaza at Shanivar wada in Pune. There were often more than two to three entrances one after the other at short distances (e.g Pune darwaza at Sinhagad).Alongside the doors there were spaces called **Jibhi** where stone plinths available where the sentries rested or kept their belongings.
Thousands of stone steps took one onto the mahadarwaza e.g Raigad built at 2851 feet above sea level has around 1500 stone steps leading to the fort.
Some ‘**Pedhis**’ or smaller forts (fortalices) had these **nagarkhanas** (drum houses also used as administrative offices and watchposts. If attention of the people below the fort was sought, then these nagars/drums were often sounded) built right over the mahadarwaza e.g as seen in the Shanivar wada, the Peshwa's residential citadel in Pune.

The walls surrounding the gates usually had mythological figurines of **Gandabherund** (two headed eagle),**Sharabha**(half bird,half beast) or those of **Hatti** (elephant), **Vyaal** (tigers), **Sinha** (lion), **Sarp** (serpents) carved on them.
‘**Dindi darwaza**’ or the wicket gate was small enough to let one man pass through and was built within the main gate. It could be opened and shut to let through small human traffic without opening the main gate.
‘**Bhuyaar**’ or secret tunnels (from the fort to the safe plains below the fort) provided a escape route to the nobles and their families incase the fort fell to the enemy.

‘**Gomukhi dwar rachana**’ (cow mouth gate formation) was a special formation of bastions including the ones flanking the main entrance gates . The bastions were often more than one and

built in the form of a cows mouth. Hence the name. The pathway had a curvature preventing a direct frontal attack with a rammer or a elephant. The idea was, if the enemy attacks the main gate, then the gate could be defended from the front as well as the rear as the view of the main entrance was also made possible from the adjoining bastion. A fine example of the Gomukhi dwar rachana is at fort Raigad.

‘**Maachi**’ or **Upatyika** was the vast expanse of plain ground accessed after entry from the gate. Its peripherey was fortified by the stone walls.There used to be residential quarters, administrative offices built on these Maachis. The periphery of this Maachi was always fortified by high walls. e.g Sanjeevani maachi on fort Raigad.



CRUDE PLAN OF A FORT

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‘**Raj sadar**’ or the offical quarters of the chief of the fort (or the king) was also the place for discussing important official matters. Ofcourse the tallest building on the fort was the '**Raj mandir**' and belonged to the king and served as his residential quarters. Besides the Raj sadar and Raj mandir there used to be the ‘**khalbatkhaanaa**’ (place for secret/ strategic discussions),’**bandigruha**’ (prisons), ‘**kadeloat**’ (steep edges of the fort from where traitors,convicts were pushed down to their death).

There were also simple temples,mosques,churches,samadhis,centotaphs,tombs,**veergals** (hero

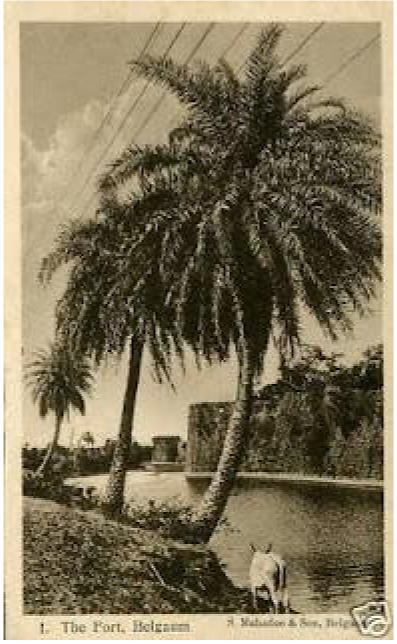
stones in the memory of the slain warriors),smaller residential quarters, clerical and administrative offices,toilets etc present on the fort.

‘**Ambaarkhaana**’ was the storehouse for consumables /grainery.e.g Ambarkhana of Panhala fort has three store houses named Ganga,Jamuna and Saraswati. Ganga is the largest one at 35 feet high and covering 10,200 sq feet with a capacity to store 50,000 maunds of grain (1 maund= 40kgs).

‘**Toffkhaanaa**’ was place to store gun powder. It was a highly guarded and water tight place lest the moisture dampened the gunpowder rendering it ineffective.
'**Shastra shala aani taalmichi jaaga** ' was the place where arms were kept (in the **shastragaar** or arms depot) and soldiers practised their martial skills.

‘**Ghodyaachya paagaa/ashwa shaalaa**’ were the horse stables on the fort (as were also stables for the elephants viz ‘**Hattishaala**’).

‘**Paanyaachya taakyaa**’ were the water reservoirs providing water supply for the forts occupants e.g Ganga Jamuna water cisterns at Shivneri fort.
‘**Baalekilla**’ or **Adhityika** was the pinnacle point (plain with the highest altitude) of the fort. It was fortified so as to be a fort within a fort. In case the enemy did manage to enter the fort, then the Baalekilla became the last point for defence.



‘**Khandak**’ or **Parikha** were the Moats were used in land forts. These were deep wide trenches dug around the periphery of the fort, filled either with water, spikes or thorny shrubs (even crocodiles and poisenous reptiles) that provided a defence to the fort from an oblivious enemy. The access to the fort was made possible by a drawbridge that over crossed this trench.e.g Ahmednagar fort has a moat 80 feet wide and 20 feet deep. The space between the fort walls and the moats was called **Revni**.
Chhatrapati Shivaji maharaj the Maratha king clearly understood the importance of forts. He laid more emphasis to the forts than land below and ensured that the forts were always in the possession of the king.

Ch.Shivaji ensured more than three to four top officers (besides the **killedar** or fortkeeper)of different castes viz the Maratha '**Sarnobat**' and '**Havaldar**'(for guarding the fort), the Brahmin '**Sabnis**' (general administration) and the Kayastha '**Karkhanis**'(maintaining accounts,treasury) but of equal rank on the fort to keep a watch over each other lest one was corruptted and conspired to hand over the fort to the enemy.
Moreover the officers always competed with each other to provide a better administration within his jurisdiction thus improving the overall administration on the fort. The posts were never heridatory (and never for long tenures) and one had to rise in heirarchy. The officials were normally suffled from one fort to the other after approx 5 years.
No officers in relation were given charge of forts in proximity of each other.
An adequate number of craftsmen like masons, carpenters,cobblers,blacksmiths,tailors etc were also kept on the fort in addition to the soldiers and other officials. There were also a presence of priests, **vaidya** (practioners of **ayurveda** , the Indian science of medicne) etc on the fort.
The access to the fort was kept as difficult as possible by planting trees shrubs, which even provided a cover for guards or army contingents placed below the fort.
If a hill fort had another hill in very close proximity, then another fort would also come up on that hill and both served as twin forts.e.g Purandar gad and Vajragad or Lohagad and Visapur gad etc.

Broken bastions, fort walls were immediately repaired without delay.
The main gates of the fort were always opened and closed at fixed timings and exceptions were made for none except perhaps the king. A strict vigil was always maintained on and around the fort.
Discipline was always paramount and there was no scope for laxation of rules.
Ch.Shivaji spent a considerable part of his revenue on the upkeep of his forts. He refortified and streangthened the forts in his control.
The king personally supervised his design and construction of forts and often gave several valuable inputs. Some of his notable forts were Pratapgad, Sindhudurg,Vijaydurg etc.
In Ch.Shivajis own words, ‘the forts ought to be so impregnable that even if mughal emperor Aurangzeb fights for a year to conquer one fort, then to capture the total three hundred and sixty forts in Maharashtra, it should take him a three sixty years (which was humanly impossible)’.

Sources: This article is based on the work in the marathi language by Shree Pravin Bhosale, Shree P .K Ghanekar, Shree Mangesh Tendulkar